Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women
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FOREMOTHERS IN EQUALITY: SOME EARLY NOVA SCOTIA SUFFRAGISTS

One of the landmarks in modern women's history was the right to vote, which was granted to most* women in Canada in the first part of the 20th century. In Nova Scotia, women attained full voting rights towards the end of the First World War, with the passage of the Nova Scotia Franchise Act on April 26, 1918. The achievement of voting rights had come only at the end of a long history of campaigning by women's groups. In fact, one of several earlier bills to give women the vote in Nova Scotia had failed to pass by only one vote in the legislature in 1894!

** Aboriginal people were not able to vote until the Indian Act was changed in 1960. Asian women and men were denied the vote because they were not eligible under the requirement at that time that Canadian voters be British subjects.*

Women's groups such as the Local Council of Women, took as their first objective the improvement of women's and children's social and economic conditions. Feminist and political activism were tied to this goal. An additional factor influencing women's participation in public life at that time was the First World War. Halifax feminists devoted much time and energy to the organization of war relief efforts during the 1914-1918 war. In the aftermath of the Halifax Explosion in 1917, many organizations in Halifax, such as the Red Cross, were almost entirely run by women, and contributed heroic effort in bringing the city through that disaster.

Here are some of the women from our own herstory. These women worked tirelessly in numerous women's organizations dedicated to the betterment and advancement of women in late 19th and early 20th century Halifax.

Edith Archibald

A feminist and community activist, Edith Archibald, like many women of her time, used her high social position (as wife of the Vice President of the Bank of Nova Scotia) to work for the improvement of society as a whole through the advancement and betterment of all women. Much of Edith Archibald's work was done through her lifelong involvement in the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). The official goal of that organization was to suppress the sale and consumption of alcohol, but it also helped women develop political skills, and supported women's suffrage. During her term as president of the WCTU, Edith Archibald made the promotion of votes for women a priority, training women in parliamentary procedure, organizing suffrage petitions to the legislature, and founding a suffrage journal. *(Note: in April 2001 the National Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada declared Edith Jessie Archibald a person of national historic significance)*

Agnes Dennis

A distant cousin of Edith Archibald, Agnes Dennis was active in numerous Halifax women's organizations. She, too, used her social rank, as wife of the publisher of the Halifax Herald, to help advance the causes she believed in. She was president of the Halifax Local Council of Women, the Red Cross, and the Victorian Order of Nurses. It was Agnes Dennis who called the first meeting of "the women of Halifax" to begin organizing for war relief in 1914. She and other feminists started and ran the Halifax branch of the Red Cross, eventually causing concern to the men on the national executive, who advised the Halifax women that men were necessary to the Red Cross executive. The women responded by appointing a token male , and continuing to retain full control of the Red Cross in Halifax.

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Anna Leonowens

Best known to the rest of the world as the same Anna who was governess at the Court of Siam, Anna Leonowens spent 20 years in Halifax, and was one of the main founders of what is now the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Anna Leonowens was an outspoken innovator and a feminist of her time. She was a leading force in a number of local organizations in Halifax in the 1880s and 1890s, including a women's book club, a Shakespearean society, and a women's suffrage organization. She was also involved in the founding and initial work of the Local Council of Women. One of the causes Anna pursued with the council was reform and improvement of prison conditions for women. The Local Council remains active to this day in advocating for continued improvement of women's social and economic conditions.

Eliza Ritchie

Eliza and her sister Mary Ritchie were two of Halifax's most prominent feminists in the early 20th century. Regarded as the intellectual leader of the women's movement in Halifax, Dr. Eliza Ritchie was known as Nova Scotia's first female college professor, although her lecturing at Dalhousie was on voluntary basis. She was the first female member of the Board of Governors at Dalhousie, from 1919-1925, and in 1927, the first woman honorary LL.D honoured by Dalhousie. Eliza Ritchie was very likely the first Canadian woman to obtain a Ph.D. degree. She had to go to the United States to earn it at Cornell. She also did post-doctoral studies in philosophy at Oxford and Leipzig. She was one of the leaders in the Halifax Local Council of Women and the Red Cross.

May Sexton

Originally from New Brunswick, May Sexton was a science graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, with a husband who shared her progressive views on women's equality. Frederick Sexton was the first principal of the Nova Scotia Technical College –now the Faculty of Engineering at Dalhousie University. In 1908, May Sexton spoke to the Local Council of Women of her vision that women should have equal access to the province-wide system of technical education that her husband was working on for the provincial government. The council took up this cause, lobbying the politicians, and making a presentation to a federal royal commission on technical education in 1910. The women achieved little success against the prevailing view of the time that women should remain in the home. During World War I, May Sexton's efforts on behalf of the Red Cross were heroic. She worked tirelessly throughout the war, and made a gruelling speaking tour of the entire province to raise funds for the Red Cross war effort. She died in 1923 of uremic poisoning as a result of kidney disease.

THANKS TO THESE PERSISTENT WOMEN AND THEIR TIRELESS EFFORTS, MANY IMPROVEMENTS IN WOMEN'S LIVES IN NOVA SCOTIA DID COME TO PASS ; NOT ONLY THE VOTE, BUT THE MANY SOCIAL PROJECTS AND CAUSES SUPPORTED BY THE LOCAL COUNCIL AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONS OVER THE YEARS.
WE STAND ON THEIR SHOULDERS TO LOOK INTO THE FUTURE: A FUTURE OF EQUALITY, FAIRNESS AND DIGNITY FOR ALL WOMEN.

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